

Charlotte sat in her car, idling just up Sutton's street, on Thanksgiving.

Sutton had told her to arrive "any time after noon" and that they'd be eating by two. So, naturally, Charlotte had arrived at twelve fifteen, and had sat outside for the last fifty minutes.

She wasn't crazy; she'd brought work to do to keep her occupied while she'd waited.

It had been easy to accept the invitation. Very easy.

Because Sutton had invited her. Truthfully, when everything boiled down, that was it. Sutton had given her an invitation and Charlotte was not going to turn her down.

Of course, if she cared to, there were other factors she could add in. Like how she *craved* more time with Sutton in any form, especially when they weren't in the office. Which was insanity for Charlotte, of course, given that Sutton's book should be a huge focal point for her, in terms of her career.

But the truth that Charlotte could admit to herself was that if Sutton told her tomorrow "I'd like to spend just as much time with you but never have to review notes for the biography" Charlotte would nix the biography in a second. Just for more time with *them*.

She'd actually kind of... enjoyed? Spending more time with Lucy, in the last few weeks. Odd, given that she was a child and Charlotte didn't have much of a longstanding track record with those.

It was Thanksgiving; not that it meant anything to Charlotte on a holiday kind of level, historically. But knowing that everyone else she knew would be in good company with good food, while she'd planned on working and having Autumn order her in dinner, pre-emptively, much as she had last year – this was a far better arrangement, objectively speaking.

Then there was also this...

Sutton had invited her during *a moment* – and Charlotte might have reached forty without knowing much about true romance, but she knew *a moment* when it landed in her lap.

Or, more aptly, when it involved Sutton Spencer, fresh rain drops trailing over her face and giving her an unreal glow, as she'd breathlessly laughed in a wondrous sound, as Charlotte had leaned in toward her.

Charlotte had wanted, so acutely, in that moment that she would have likely agreed to anything Sutton suggested.

And, in those ways, this agreement to join for Thanksgiving was just fine. Time with Sutton and Lucy, a meal homemade by Sutton, which guaranteed it would be delicious.

And then there were the other ways...

She bit her lip and looked down at her phone as it started vibrating on the middle console, flicking her eyes to the front door of Sutton's home, before she reached down and swiped to answer.

"Buonasera, Caleb," she greeted.

“And buongiorno back to you, my dear sister! Happy Thanksgiving,” her brother’s exuberant voice rang through her car’s Bluetooth.

That quite irritating feeling – of nerves – swam through Charlotte’s stomach. “Yes, Happy Thanksgiving to you, too. Shouldn’t you and Dean be up to sipping on your fifth wine of the day and ordering a homemade pasta?”

“Fifth glass of wine! What do you take me for? It’s the fourth, and since we aren’t grandparents, we aren’t out for dinner yet; we’re in Europe and it’s not even seven.”

She hummed, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel.

“We’re at the hotel to get ready for a night out. But I wanted to do my brotherly duty and remind you to not *work* on a holiday. You better not be at your office.” She could hear the wagging of his finger in his tone.

Charlotte’s gaze slid to Sutton’s front door again and she felt great about not lying as she confirmed for him, “I am, indeed, not at my office.”

She would say nothing about the laptop and files she had sitting on the passenger seat.

There was a beat of quiet, before he spoke again and sounded marginally more suspicious, “Where, exactly, *are* you? It sounds like I’m on speaker? Bluetooth?”

“I am... in the car,” she hedged, running her finger over the steering wheel.

“And are you being held at gunpoint? I’d like to be able to explain this *tone*...” he trailed off expectantly.

And, fine. Charlotte was woman enough to face her own brother. Even though he couldn’t see her, she straightened her shoulders and set her jaw as she admitted, “I am having Thanksgiving with Sutton. If you must know.”

“Ah... and if I know Sutton—”

“Which, for the record, you do not. Not well,” she remarked, honestly. It wasn’t as though they’d spent much time together back in the day. Her own doing, but still.

Caleb was undeterred. “Yes, but in meeting her a handful of times and hearing you talk about her, I know her better than I know Ada,” he said, laughingly referencing William’s wife.

She scowled.

“Anyway, the point is, Sutton is likely having the holiday with her *family*,” he announced precisely and in an annoyingly excited voice.

“Congratulations, Caleb, that was very, very difficult to deduce that someone would be with their family on a day such as this.”

“Charlotte,” he said, calmly, after managing his laughter. “What are you doing sitting in your car? You’ve toe-to-toe with some of the shadiest, nastiest politicians in the game! You took on heads in the oil industry! You – do I have to go on, listing the many reasons you should take as comfort reasons to not be anxious to enter that house or was that all right?”

Charlotte, personally, did not see the humor her brother found in all this.

And she did not mind saying so; she was working on being *open*.

Plus, admittedly, it was much harder to hold in when she had these nerves darting through her, settling angrily and unfamiliarly in her stomach.

“I suppose I don’t personally find it all at amusing as you do. If you recall, Katherine Spencer was not much of a fan of mine when we’d met.”

Which was putting it mildly, in her mind. They’d really only interacted the one time, at the Spencer family New Year’s Eve party, and it had not been a pleasant experience for Charlotte; she could still remember the way Katherine had looked at her, as if she’d been able to just *sense* that Charlotte wasn’t going to be good enough for Sutton.

And in the end, she’d proven her right.

Here she was, a decade later, going to face the woman again, this time *after* breaking Sutton’s heart?

On top of that, Regan and Alex were in there, too.

This Thanksgiving was a road map of navigation through all of the people in Sutton’s life who had known the truth about their relationship and had all, in some way or other, expressed distrust for Charlotte. Who had warned Sutton away from her even before she’d broken both of their hearts.

She bit at the inside of her cheek as she admitted in an irritatingly small voice, “Facing down any political foe seems a lot simpler than this.”

Because, professionally, Charlotte was certain of herself.

When it came to matters of the heart... this was all new.

And these were people who Sutton adored, loved in her selfless, whole-hearted way. People who had been there for Sutton when Charlotte wasn’t.

Charlotte was happy to be in Sutton’s life again, and to say that she was unconcerned about what these people might think, about what they might say to Sutton about her *now*, might be the lie of the century.

“I’ve spent years building up a reputation so that when I walk into the room, professionally, those against me know they will be in for an arduous uphill battle, and I...” She blew out a deep breath from the very pits of uncertainty inside of her. “Right now, *I* feel like I’m on the very base of the steepest hill.”

Caleb was quiet for a few beats before he cleared his throat and spoke – loudly and assuredly, making her startle at the tone. “Charlotte Elizabeth Thompson, you are a *force* to be reckoned with, do you hear me? You aren’t about to be intimidated by people at a Thanksgiving dinner! You are intimidated by no one! You were brought up by the most intimidating person either of us will ever know! Get in there.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted in consideration. “Decent job.” She’d admit, it did give her the extra motivation to get her ass in gear.

“I know how to get through to you. Now, go. I’ll talk to you later!” And he was gone.

Charlotte took in a deep breath; she *was* Charlotte Elizabeth Thompson. She could stand the heat she might get. She certainly wasn't a withering wallflower.

A knock on her window made her jump, accidentally slamming her hands against her steering wheel, as her heart pounded.

She turned to see none other than Katherine Spencer herself standing there.

There was truly no time like the present, was there?

Charlotte steeled herself, cut the engine and quickly packed her work haul into her bag, the unorganized motion of it making her grimace inwardly. But more than that, she didn't want to prolong this encounter now that it had begun.

"I came out to grab some things from the car," Katherine started speaking as Charlotte opened her door, a bag, indeed, in her arms. "And saw you sitting in yours. For the last half an hour or so?"

She arched an eyebrow at Charlotte, and so, *that* was how it would be from the start. She appreciated it, in a way.

"Yes, well, I had some work to finish up." She gestured at her own bag. She took in a breath and smiled at the older woman. With streaks of silver running through her hair and subtle laugh lines next to her eyes and mouth, Katherine Spencer appeared as attractive and dignified as ever, like she'd seen the future coming and had shaken its hand, inviting it over as a friend. "It's lovely to see you again, Mrs. Spencer."

Katherine raised her eyebrows at Charlotte as they started walking to the house, returning her smile, with one that wasn't what Charlotte would say was *cold*, but she certainly wouldn't say it was friendly, either. "And you, Senator Thompson."

"Oh, I'd prefer if you'd call me Charlotte." She gestured around them, "We aren't here on business, after all."

Katherine eyed her bag. "Some of us aren't."

And she inwardly grimaced – had that make her come off as a workaholic? Which, she *was*, fine. But she thought that she'd been balancing her friendship with Sutton very well. She'd taken more time to just *be* and exist in the moment with Sutton in the last weeks than she'd ever done for just herself in years.

"Of course, I'm referring to the book my daughter is writing, about you." Katherine expanded.

Charlotte did not overlook that Katherine hadn't said that *she* could refer to her as anything other than Mrs. Spencer. Duly noted but not surprising.

"Right," Charlotte confirmed, but treaded very lightly.

If she approached Katherine in the way she would approach anyone in the political world, she wouldn't necessarily want to give much away until she knew exactly what her stance was. She knew her stance on Charlotte wasn't "good" but she also didn't know exactly what all Katherine knew about her. About her and Sutton.

Sutton, for all of her part openness of talking about her parents, had been relatively reticent on them, currently. She mentioned them in passing enough that Charlotte was well-aware she still had a good relationship with them, but she'd never, for example, brought up what Katherine knew about the book.

It was difficult to win someone over when you didn't have an end goal. It was difficult to form a workable goal when you didn't know exactly what someone else's goal was. And unlike in a political arena, Charlotte couldn't research and prepare on the subject of Katherine Spencer.

As they approached the front door, walking up the walkway – where Charlotte was confronted with the visual in her mind's eye of running up this walkway less than a week ago, Sutton's hand in hers, her laughter in her ears over the din of the rain, and her heart stuttered in her chest.

It gave her another reason to subtly roll her shoulders back.

"I didn't see your driver?" Katherine asked, as they climbed the steps.

Charlotte gave her as charming of a smile she had, though she wasn't sure it would win her any particular favors here. "Well, it is Thanksgiving; I don't generally have my staff working on holidays. As you said, most people don't."

Katherine inclined her head, in some sort of... relatively positive recognition. At least, that's what Charlotte thought it was, as she opened the door.

"Charlotte!" Lucy's squeal of her name cut through their tension immediately, before full crossing the threshold into the house.

She'd never been so grateful to hear a shout in her life. Even aside from the astute relief, she found herself truly smiling as she turned to face the pounding of little footsteps running down the hall.

Lucy's hair was done in two pigtail braids, now mussed from what Charlotte was sure was a day of excitement with her family here, wearing a white shirt under her dark purple overalls. She slid to a stop in front of them after running in socks down the hardwood floor and smiled up, proudly revealing her missing teeth.

She was so ridiculously cute, Charlotte thought, and that alone was... so strange, for her. But it was true, and she *felt* it, this sweet adoration for the little human in front of her. So, so strange.

Since the night she'd babysat, she would say Lucy's feelings on her felt akin to a baby duck that imprinted; she seemed to love Charlotte.

She'd stopped by and had lunch with Sutton and Lucy, during which Lucy had gravitated right next to Charlotte's chair, so close she'd almost been climbing in her lap. And even when Sutton had lightly chastised her daughter about personal space, Charlotte had genuinely not minded.

She'd felt... endeared. Especially when Lucy had looked up at her with big, blue eyes and said, "msorry," slurred with her missing tooth.

Lucy had showed her the skills she'd picked up at karate class, and had asked Sutton to facetime her to show Charlotte her missing teeth from last week. Granted, Charlotte hadn't known much of what to say to her, but on the other hand, she hadn't been irritated at the call that disrupted her day, either.

It was – it wasn't anything she was used to, she could admit that.

And she honestly didn't know if this affection she felt for Lucy had begun purely from the knowledge that this little human was Sutton's little human. That the bright, happy blue eyes and adorable, sweet smile that clearly were inherited from her mother, had nothing to do with how Charlotte instinctively cared for her.

But, she knew that it was a different kind of feeling than she'd ever felt before, what she was starting to feel whenever Lucy was happy to see her and wanted to talk to her. Something she'd never felt, in a very soft way that she was still deciding how to grapple with.

“Lucy!” She bent down to examine the missing teeth with the same intensity she used to look over legal documents. “Would you look at that. I certainly hope the tooth fairy came to visit.”

Lucy nodded vigorously, *very* seriously informing her, “Oh, she did,” before throwing her arms around her waist.

Charlotte, at first, had not quite known how to take this greeting, but she now reached down and softly patted at Lucy's shoulders.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Lucy exclaimed as she pulled back. “This is my grandma!” She pointed at Katherine. “Grandma, this is Charlotte, she's mama's friend.”

The unimpressed, almost harsh expression Katherine had worn with her simply melted away. It was sheer warmth in blue eyes – the same as Sutton *and* Lucy – and a warm tone that felt so at-odds with what Charlotte got from Katherine, it nearly gave her whiplash. “You did such a good job introducing us, honey. Guess what I got from the car?”

Katherine held the bag out, clearly capturing Lucy's rapt attention, excitement lighting up her features. “What?!”

“It may be an early Christmas gift...” Katherine wiggled her eyebrows playfully.

It was interesting, Charlotte thought, to watch a grandmother and granddaughter interact. As the most important familial bond she'd had growing up, she didn't think her own relationship had the same tone as this one, even just from this so far.

Then again, her grandmother had been a very one-of-a-kind person, and very different, foundationally, from Katherine Spencer in many ways.

“Can I see, grandma, please, can I see?” Lucy's voice jumped an octave as she bounced on her toes.

“I've already asked your mom.” Katherine winked. “Let's open it in the living room.”

Lucy cheered and gestured at them both to follow her down the hall and into the fray. It was in the look she exchanged with Katherine, and the gut instinct that settled heavily in her stomach, that told her... this was not done for the day.

The scents of the meal Sutton was preparing wafted through the house, immediately setting the tone as something warm and pleasant. It didn't entirely settle the knots in Charlotte's stomach, but it was something.

She paused in the doorway to the large living area, Katherine and Lucy walking ahead of her, just to get her bearings.

Regan, Emma, and Alex looked to be having an animated conversation – at least, Regan and Alex seemed animated, while Emma looked amused – and in a way, the familiarity of that struck something at ease inside of her. Lucy had run over to Jack, and now held court with both of her grandparents. Sutton's youngest brother – Ethan, this one she knew, despite having only met once in passing at the New Year's Eve party – sat on the couch, commenting on the parade to Alex's boyfriend, whose name she *didn't* remember, but they'd never formally met, so she gave herself a pass.

In a way, the fact that they all behaved as Charlotte might have anticipated in this scene gave her a blanket of security. Even if she was the odd woman out, she could read these people, read a room.

Rather than forge deeper into the lion's den, however, she turned and slipped into the kitchen. To come face-to-... face with Sutton bent at the waist, peering into the oven. It was a view she certainly appreciated.

"Regan, I swear, you better not be coming back to take out any more appetizers. No one will be able to eat when the turkey is done," the exasperation in her tone was obvious, and it made Charlotte's shoulders loosen, the smile on her face entirely natural.

"Ah, okay, I will refrain from taking a tray out for a rotation in the living room, then."

Sutton froze, before straightening up comically fast, whipping around.

Her cheeks were pink – likely from the heat in the kitchen, but she thought there was a little blush there too – her hair pulled back into a half-ponytail, and she had an apron folded around her waist that accentuated her hips in the truly most delightful way.

Charlotte would be the first to admit that she was not one to have any fantasies about women staying at home, so this specific image being so appealing to her in this moment was – odd.

But she was fairly certain that Sutton in any way appealed to her.

She shook herself out of it; she had been doing her very best in the last several weeks to not delve overly-much into her attraction to Sutton or the feelings that swirled low in the pit of her stomach whenever they spoke.

It didn't mean she didn't feel them, because *fuck*, did she ever. But Sutton wanted friendship and Charlotte was doing her best to abide by it.

... it was sometimes difficult, though.

"Charlotte," Sutton breathed out her name, surprised, but also warm, before that smile melted over her features. "I didn't realize you were here."

“You did say any time after noon,” she playfully tilted her head to the clock, that, indeed, reported it being one.

Sutton rolled her eyes as she wiped her hands over the apron. “I *did*.”

“And I am a relatively punctual person,” she added, “No?”

Sutton attempted to purse her lips to stifle a smile, unsuccessfully. “Fine, you win.”

A thoughtful look crossed her face for a moment, before she walked – hesitantly at first – across the room, toward Charlotte.

“I’m glad you came,” Sutton murmured as she came to a stop right in front of Charlotte, worrying at her bottom lip for a moment, before she swiftly leaned down and pressed a kiss on her cheek, and wrapped her arms around Charlotte’s waist.

It was casual. It was absolutely the same thing Sutton had done to every other person who’d arrived at her home today, more than likely, and Charlotte knew that. Logically.

Illogically, she had to take a moment to revel in it. In the feeling of Sutton’s body against hers, the way she could breathe in her perfume over the smells of the food cooking when she was this close, the lingering feeling of her lips brushing on her cheek.

They’d gotten better at casual touches, it was true. It wasn’t awkward or stilted between them.

It didn’t mean Charlotte didn’t take absolute pleasure in them.

She squeezed once around Sutton’s waist – a conscientiously casual embrace – before they both drew back.

“I’m glad I did, too,” she finally returned, and... honestly, she was. Even with her rather questionable welcome.

Because, honestly, if it meant *this* – this hug, this look of happiness to see her all over Sutton’s face, this extra time with Sutton when she may have otherwise not seen her for days – it was worth it.

“I brought you something,” she murmured, not necessarily wanting to break this easy, quiet moment. She reached into her bag, deliberately chosen for the size, and proudly pulled out the container she’d ordered had personally picked up yesterday afternoon.

Sutton’s smile was immediate and wide and so genuine, it made Charlotte nearly puff out her chest with pride at doing well. “Lemon cakes! Where did you get them? I don’t recognize the bakery?”

“Ah...” Charlotte cleared her throat. “I just happened to be at Un Petit Plaisir and noticed they were on the menu, and was lucky enough to get this to take with me last night.”

Sutton’s eyebrows raised, clearly questioning, even with her excitement. “You got these from that crazy fancy French place that opened less than six months ago, run by a Michelin-star chef?” Her gaze, amusement very clear, slid to Charlotte’s. “That you *just so happened* to be at last night?”



Charlotte pursed her lips, refusing to be *embarrassed*, of all things. “I just so happened to notice they were on the menu, I didn’t say I noticed last night.” She’d noticed when she’d had a business dinner there, two months ago, and had made a mental note to buy them for Sutton, at some point in time.

This seemed like a perfect time.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Sutton said, her own voice falling soft, as she looked down at the dessert box.

“You are aware that I was raised to have impeccable manners? I couldn’t show up to a holiday meal empty-handed, darling. My genteel ancestors would be rolling in their graves.”

Sutton’s laughter rang out, loud and entirely perfect. “Ah, right. Whenever I think of you, my first thought after is of manners.”

“What else could it possibly be?” She asked, and couldn’t help but look up at Sutton from under her lashes. Even when she *knew* she was flirting with Sutton, though, she couldn’t always help it.

And, if Charlotte was honest with herself, she *would* desperately like to know what it was that Sutton thought about her.

Sutton’s smile slightly faded as she stared at Charlotte for a long moment, their gazes locked. “I—”

She didn’t get to hear what she was very much wanting to know as the answer, as Sutton’s sister walked in, announcing her presence loud and clear. “Sutton, I know you said we can’t have more apps, but Ethan and I are *starving*.”

The moment was broken, and Sutton turned to look at her sister. The softness dissipated as exasperation took its place. “Alex, there is no way you are starving; less than an hour ago, I put out the chips and dip and the scallops, and everything was eaten. Mostly by you two!”

Alex tossed her hands in the air. “Regan and dad really helped put it away, too.” Her gaze caught on Charlotte, then, and she could see the moment recognition set in. “You got any peanut butter?”

The words were said as a joke, but with a sharp edge that she could recognize.

“Hello, Alex. Very nice to see you again,” Charlotte gamely smiled at her.

Alex arched an eyebrow. “Yeah, you, too. You know, back in the day, I was still in an amateur status as a fighter.” She crossed her arms, which did have a very admirable muscle tone, even though her long-sleeved shirt. “I’m now a world champion.”

“*That* is the most random, ridiculous statement you could ever possibly greet someone with,” Sutton crossed the kitchen and nudged her sister – who, though much more muscular, stood several inches shorter – out of the way. “And if you don’t have anything else to do in here except use minimal manners, you can go back out to report to the masses that the turkey will be done in twenty minutes.”

Alex nailed her with a *look*, even as she exaggeratedly sighed at Sutton – she supposed it was a universal relationship of sisters, regardless of age – and left the room.

She understood Alex’s message loud and clear. Her career heights were both impressive and threatening.

Especially as Charlotte understood a threat when she heard it.

Sutton gave her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry.”

Charlotte waved her off. “I’ve dealt with much stranger people than your sister,” she assured, which made Sutton laugh.

Winning, yet again.

“I’m sure you have,” Sutton agreed, before she startled at the sound of a timer going off on her phone. She spun, reaching out and turning the sound off. “Do you want to help me get everything set up?”

And if Charlotte was honest, she’d never had such a good time in the kitchen. She very rarely ever spent any time in the kitchen, granted, but when she did, it was never fun. It never involved Sutton directing her around – which, she’d uncharacteristically always enjoyed – or Sutton standing closely behind her and directing Charlotte on how she wanted certain things arranged.

Charlotte wished the rest of the day would be that simple.

It wasn’t.

Dinner went well, for the most part.

She was seated next to Sutton on one side, and Jack on the other. Which, honestly, worked very well in her favor, as she got to discuss what she was best at discussing: work.

It was brought to an end toward dessert, when Alex cut in and reminded Jack that per Katherine’s rules, politics talk wasn’t supposed to be holiday meal discussion, which Katherine seconded.

Which was also fine.

Made even *finer* when Sutton nudged at her ankle under the table and gave her an encouraging smile after.

“So, how is the book going?” Katherine asked, as Jack volunteered to assist Sutton in bringing out dessert.

“I thought we weren’t discussing work?” Ethan teased his mom from across the table, and Charlotte had never had a younger sibling, but she appreciated Sutton’s in this moment.

“I said *politics*, you little...” Katherine trailed off, pointing her fork at her son, in a playful threat.

And it was crazy, really, to see the difference in Katherine’s tone and look in her eye when she was talking to someone she cherished, like her children.

Charlotte cleared her throat, folding her hands over the napkin in her lap. “It’s going well; we’ve actually gotten up to about two thirds of the way through the initial proposed content. Sutton’s been amazing.”

Katherine nodded in agreement at that, at least. “I always love when she writes; such incredible talent.” Still, intense blue eyes ran over her face. “What exactly is the schedule like? I’ve never approached writing this sort of project.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but feel like she was walking into a trap, though, for Katherine’s immense credit, she couldn’t quite see where her feet were about to be yanked out from under her.

So she answered cautiously. “Well, we meet – in my office – twice a week, generally Tuesdays and Saturdays. Review the contents – timelines, anecdotes, that sort of thing—”

“Not always in your office!” Lucy interrupted, and Charlotte had no idea when she’d started paying attention to them rather than being immersed in her uncle telling her about video games.

“Lucy, sweet, manners,” Katherine gently admonished.

Lucy looked sheepish for all of three seconds. “Sorry.” She paused, before saying, “scuse me... not *always* in your office!”

Charlotte would *not* blush.

“Oh no?” Katherine asked, looking at her, but it was Lucy who answered.

“Nope! Sometimes, um, sometimes Charlotte came here for dinner. And we got lunch out at a café! And Charlotte met us at the park once—”

“Yeah, and wasn’t the park on a Thursday afternoon? Not Tuesday or Saturday,” Regan interjected from further down the table, tapping at her chin in “thought.” Emma’s arm, draped around Regan, tightened, but there was a small smirk on her face.

Clearly, in getting together, she found Regan’s commentary more entertaining than she had back in the day.

Charlotte maintained her smile even as she could feel the strain of it. She could do this.

“You’re right,” she acknowledged.

And it was true. Two weeks ago, she had met Lucy and Sutton at the park for a half hour. The weather had been unseasonably warm, and they’d been only a ten minute walk away from where she’d been having her afternoon meetings.

“Ah, I see,” there was a look in her eye, now, like *this* had been the line of questioning she had been after.

Like, why had Lucy been with them? If this was a professional relationship, why did it so often break into other parts of their lives?

Charlotte should have seen it coming, and she felt foolish for not. She wasn’t sure if she thought Katherine Spencer was evil, a genius, or both, for having brought it up under the guise of casual conversation amidst everyone else.

Likely both, she admitted to herself, with a grudging respect.

She steeled herself for whatever would come next – she was no stranger to answering to intimidatingly strong women, having essentially been raised by one – though it, admittedly, was not what she'd been looking forward to, today.

Sutton, in that moment, walked out of the kitchen, pie carefully held in her hands. Though in conversation with her father, she locked eyes with Charlotte and smiled brightly at her. And she felt that smile. She felt it in her chest, hitting and landing so warmly around her heart the same time that it gave her that feeling in her stomach. The feeling she didn't quite know how to describe, but she only felt it with Sutton.

And that was why she was here.

She was saved, also, as Jack and Sutton retook their seats, and conversation revolved around the food.

“Though the pies are delicious,” she started, toward the end of the dessert, facing Sutton. “No lemon cakes?”

Sutton flushed, extremely appealingly, as she shrugged. “Those are going to be just for me. And maybe some for Lucy.”

Winning, yet again.

And she avoided another interaction with Katherine immediately after dinner, in the form of a saving grace of Lucy, who insisted Charlotte play her in a game of Chutes and Ladders. Which she'd never once played in her life, but she was more than happy to oblige. And then obliged to play Go Fish. And checkers, which had personally been her favorite –

“My grandparents brought me this,” she said as she held out the box to Charlotte, having tugged her by the hand to the dining room, after everything had long been cleaned up. “But I dunno how to play.” She looked up at Charlotte. “Do you?”

Charlotte smiled indulgently at the pout on Lucy's little face that appeared as she didn't know what to make of the game presented to her. “I do. Do you want me to teach you?”

Lucy nodded enthusiastically, and as they set it out, Charlotte found herself saying, “When I was a little younger than you, my grandmother taught me checkers.” She bit her lip, smiling at the memory. “Granted, she did it to get me ready to play chess, but, still.”

She could remember her grandmother telling her about learning to think strategically, even before Charlotte could properly say the word. And she remembered wanting more than anything, learning how to impress her grandmother. How to win. Then she'd bought Charlotte a chess board at seven, and they evolved.

“What's chess?” Lucy asked, staring at the board.

“It's... similar to this. The boards are the same. Only all of these little pieces,” she held up a checker. “Look different. One is called a queen, one a king. One is shaped like a horse. And they all move differently across the board.”

“I want to play the one with the horse!” Lucy exclaimed, lifting her little hands full of the round pieces, as if she could trade them in.

“We can work up to it,” she’d answered with a chuckle.

She was saved yet again, when subsequently drawn into a conversation with Ethan – a true surprise to her – about green energy; apparently something he was very interested in.

She tried to find Sutton, then, after having been separated from her for the few hours since they’d eaten. First, Sutton had been whisked away by Regan when Alex’s boyfriend – name still unclear; she’d yet to hear him truly speak – and Ethan had started cleaning up. She’d then been having an intent discussion with her father.

She didn’t find Sutton, when she stepped into the kitchen, however. She found –

“Charlotte, just who I’ve been wanting a word with.” Katherine caught her before she could duck back out. Her tone was somehow genial steel; in an alternate universe, Charlotte might have enjoyed spending enough time with her to emulate it.

Her luck could only take her so far, it seemed. But Charlotte Thompson didn’t run from a difficult situation.

She nodded, straightened her spine, and walked into the kitchen. “Ah, yes? Do you need… assistance?” She peered around; if she knew Sutton – and she *did*, she knew she did – the kitchen would be getting deep-cleaned as soon as this was all over.

“I was just starting the second load for the dishwasher,” Katherine elaborated, bumping it closed with her hip.

Charlotte nodded. And waited. She might as well.

“Why did you ask my daughter to write your biography?”

“You’ve said it yourself; she’s very talented,” she shot back quickly, evenly.

Still, Katherine’s look was unwavering. “She is, very much so. And yet, for a project like yours, you could have gotten many other writers. It seems like a very… personal choice to make.”

Charlotte swallowed back an easy rebuttal; she had many that she’d given to her publisher. They’d worked, too, to get them to this point.

Instead, she drew in a deep breath and latched onto her fortitude. “It *was* personal. Yes. I wanted Sutton because she knows me. And I think she will write a fair portrayal of me.”

“And it had nothing to do with anymore more personal?”

Charlotte’s stomach twisted in revolt at the sharpness of her voice, the inquiry of something so… yes, personal to her. “I’m not really certain that’s any of your business, if I’m being honest.”

“It may *not* be my place to say this much,” Katherine acknowledged easily. “But I think that you are a woman who would appreciate a direct approach rather than to dance around anything, and I’d be a liar if I didn’t tell you that I have concerns.”

Charlotte bit at her inner-cheek, as she nodded slowly. “I do appreciate a direct approach.”

In a situation like this, yes. No games were really needed, here.

“The reality, Charlotte, is that as an individual, as a human, I think you are lovely. I’ve followed your career, and I find you a very impressive woman. In that way, I always have. I don’t think you’re a bad person, and, as a matter of fact, I think you are – in many ways – quite a decent one.”

Charlotte knew she didn’t hide her reaction well, as her eyes widened, because that was *definitely* not what she’d expected to hear. “Thank you... I think the same of you,” she returned honestly, but cautiously.

“But you shattered my daughter’s heart.”

Her heart sank, quickly and sickeningly, at the words. Not angry, not loud, but *impassioned*, and hurt, almost as if she’d somehow broken Katherine’s along with Sutton’s.

Charlotte swallowed hard at the reminder. It didn’t matter how much time had passed; she could still see Sutton’s heartbreak clear as day.

“And that... that makes it very, very difficult to like you, on this personal level. It’s difficult not to be weary of you, because I have seen her be hurt, time and time again, and I know you do not have children, but watching your child – no matter how old they may be – be devastated like that...” Katherine trailed off, rolling her lips, a pained expression sliding over her own features. “It’s quite difficult to watch.”

It was impossible for Charlotte, then, to hold onto her own feelings of this being none of Katherine’s business. Especially as her words twisted so deeply into Charlotte, aching so, as she admitted, “I don’t want to hurt Sutton. It’s the last thing I want to do.”

The rawness in her voice, that was the utter truth. It surprised even herself to hear how pleading she was.

Katherine’s eyes widened at it, too. Before she firmed her mouth into a line. “You never did *want* to hurt her, though, did you?”

The reality of *that* struck through Charlotte with unerringly painful accuracy, twisting inside of her with everything else. She swallowed hard with it. “No. I didn’t.”

“I know. Because I was *there*,” Katherine stressed, her eyes boring into Charlotte’s. “Even the one night I met you in person, I could see it. I knew how you looked at her; I know you didn’t hurt her because you didn’t care.”

“That was a long time ago,” she pointed out, aiming a measured look at Katherine, taking a deep breath to attempt to level out the unexpected hurt from this reality check lacing through her. “And Sutton moved on.” The living, breathing, Lucy-aged proof was part of that.

Katherine didn’t elaborate on Sutton, though. What she said was far worse.

“It doesn’t seem, however, that you did,” she stated quietly, knowingly, in a way that made Charlotte’s heart race, and a heat creep up the back of her neck.

Being so *seen* like that, by a woman who hardly knew her, was... extremely disquieting. And, truthfully, Charlotte didn't have the words to respond.

Katherine nodded, slowly. "So, it may not be my place. But I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity while I have it. Sutton may be as... soft as a person can be, in a great deal many ways, in the best of ways," the words were said with utter affection. "But my daughter will do what she wants to do and with whom, as she also has a determination that I admire. She knows what she wants and no matter what I could say or think – or anyone could say or think – she is going to partake in her own actions, and she should." She nailed Charlotte with a final look. "I would very much just like you to truly think about yours."

Charlotte's heart pounded in her chest as Katherine seemed to be able to take a true, deep breath for the first time all day – after stealing Charlotte's ability to – and stepping around her, through the doorway and out of the kitchen.

It was only when she was gone that Charlotte allowed herself to reach out and brace her hand on the counter. She leaned on it, heavily, gathering herself.

Katherine Spencer, on one hand, didn't think she was a terrible person. Which was great. She did, however, know likely every detail about how she'd made Sutton feel back in the day, and – worst of all – read Charlotte's feelings for Sutton like a fucking book.

What the –

A low whistle sounded from behind her, and she squeezed her eyes closed, breathing deeply for a second to pull herself together, before she turned to see Regan.

Charlotte couldn't help herself from lifting her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. "I suppose let's do this all at once, then?" At the very least, at least there were no more disingenuous niceties that could possibly be in play.

Regan approached with a smile, though. One that seemed very genuine, as she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Charlotte in their corner of the kitchen. That alone was a little disconcerting, if she was being honest.

Because Regan was just as strong of a Sutton protector as Katherine, if her memory serves, and far more... openly volatile.

"I don't think I've ever heard such a dressing-down from her like that," Regan commented. Ah. That explained the smile, she supposed.

"Ah, that makes me feel very special," she drawled, biting at the inside of her cheek, as she – hopefully unnoticeably – rubbed her hand over her stomach to settle the twisted up feelings there.

"*Brutal*," Regan stressed.

"It won't be my favorite holiday pastime."

"Yeah, but... I mean, in-laws can suck, right? That's why there's a whole, like, trope about it." Regan shrugged.

Charlotte opened her mouth to agree before what Regan said really registered to her. And – “In-laws?”

Regan’s smile was slow and a little devilish, if she was being honest. “I’m not Sutton’s *mother*; I know everything that’s happening between you two.”

Charlotte raised her eyebrows, staring Regan down. “Then you know that we are only friends, then.”

“I know you are both currently deluding yourselves into that, for now, yeah.”

She wasn’t even going to argue the point. Because... she was now positive that she wasn’t hiding anything, from anyone. Except *maybe* Sutton herself.

“Perhaps you would like to make your vaguely threatening commentary now, then. I vividly recall you were good at things like that.”

Regan didn’t walk into the opening she gave her, though. Instead, she hit Charlotte with a much softer look than she’d *ever* seen on her, in the past. “No,” she said, simply. “Because like Katherine, I was there, too. Every single day. And I *really* saw how you looked at Sutton.”

Charlotte refused to be embarrassed by it. *Refused*. She told the heating of her cheeks as much.

“And, honestly, she was right – it’s still here. But if *I’m* being honest? I’d rather have Sutton be falling back into something with someone who looks at her like that than anything else. Even Layla didn’t get that same... *look*.” Regan scowled at the name.

Jesus, was Charlotte going to have to have Autumn photograph her when Sutton walked into a room to discover this look?

“Regardless of what happens from it, I’m not as worried about it, this time around. That’s all *I’m* saying, so you can take that for what you will.”

It really shouldn’t mean as much to her as it did. Truly. And yet...

“Thank you,” the words rasped out, honestly.

Regan shrugged. “A best friend’s duty.” She nodded her chin out to the other room. “By the way, a Charlie Brown Thanksgiving is about to be played. Tradition. You should join.”

“Maybe,” she murmured, because – she desperately needed a minute.

Regan shrugged, again, before she took a step toward the door.

“Do your in-laws...” she swallowed, clearing her throat, but was unable to help her curiosity. “Are you speaking from experience? About Emma’s family?”

Regan crowed with laughter. “As if! They fucking love me.” That cackle followed her out into the living room.

Charlotte would lie if she said it didn’t lift her spirits in some way.



She remained there, in the kitchen, for... she wasn't sure how long, replaying both conversations in her mind. Trying to sort them, organize them, and figure out how they made her feel, and then what to *do* with it all.

A warm touch landed on her wrist, dragging her out of her introspection, and she turned to face Sutton.

"Hey." A big, genuine smile washed over Sutton's face, lighting her up at the same time that it shot right through everything inside of her. "We're watching a movie in there. Tradition," a quiet, uncertain look filtered over her face. "Do—"

The thoughts that had been circling, everything about what Katherine had said, came to the forefront of her mind, and she just, "Sutton, I... I want to tell you that I am so sorry. For the past. And I hope you know that."

*You shattered her heart*, echoed in her ears, and... she didn't want to be that person. She didn't want to be the person who had shattered Sutton Spencer's heart, even if she already was.

A flurry of emotions moved over Sutton's face – surprise, confusion, contemplation, and then finally a flash of irritated exasperation. "Who said something to you and what was it?" Sutton's hand squeezed gently, encouragingly at her wrist. "Was it my mom?"

Charlotte shook her head. "Honestly, it's not important."

"It *is*, because I invited you here. Because I want you here. And I don't want someone to say something that makes you look like – like that," Sutton gestured. "Like you're sad." She slid her hand up Charlotte's arm, stroking.

The touch was comforting, bafflingly so. Reassuring. And still, she latched onto it.

Still, she shook her head. "Honestly, darling, it's fine."

And, she realized as she said it that she meant it.

At the end of the day, Charlotte had no intentions of leaving Sutton's life, in whatever capacity Sutton was ready to allow her in it. If Katherine needed to air her grievances with her, Charlotte would take it. She wasn't someone who wilted down from that; she could handle whatever came her way.

"I just... I don't think we properly talk about it. And that's all right. But I hope you know," she repeated, quietly.

Sutton was quiet, taking her in, her own expression somber, as she whispered, "I know."

Sutton slid her hand down to Charlotte's and laced their fingers together. And when she squeezed, Charlotte felt it. In her chest, in her stomach, everywhere.

"Come. Watch the movie," Sutton coaxed, tugging her hand.

She wouldn't say no. She'd never say no, to this.

To the time she got to spend with Sutton in any capacity, to the feeling, the lightness, Sutton inspired in her. It was addicting and beautiful and the best she ever felt.

And it certainly was *not* friendship, in any way.

Charlotte also, as it happened, wasn't entirely positive how long she could continue to act like it was.